

Opening Statement
Chairman Connie Mack
Western Hemisphere Subcommittee
“The Colombia and Panama Free Trade Agreements:
National Security and Foreign Policy Priorities”
March 17, 2011

Thank you all for being here today. I would especially like to thank Former Ambassador Jim Jones and Former Under-Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Christopher Padilla for making themselves available for questions from the Subcommittee.

During the first Western Hemisphere Subcommittee hearing, we highlighted where the current Administration has been working without a coordinated strategy in a manner that harms U.S. interests. At one of the more worrisome moments in the hearing, Assistant Secretary Arturo Valenzuela was unable to define the criteria for moving forward on the Colombia and Panama free trade agreements. Shortly after the hearing a mid-level working group was in Bogotá to report to the President on the overall progress that has been made in Colombia, yet we have seen no outcomes from this trip.

Meanwhile, over the past two years, the Obama Administration has allowed U.S. special interest groups to take over, influencing public opinion with false statements, and successfully stalling the process for reasons unrelated to the importance of security, trade and commerce.

Today, I want to delve deeper into the questions Assistant Secretary Valenzuela was unable to answer. While the Obama Administration refuses to move forward, we will not allow them to fall down on their job to send the pending Colombia and Panama Trade Agreements to Congress for a vote. The tired claim by the Administration that they are waiting to ensure Congress has the votes before sending the trade agreements is no longer a valid excuse.

It is my goal, as Chairman of this Subcommittee, to show the American people how foreign policy failures are impacting their economic and national security.

Both agreements would immediately eliminate burdensome tariffs on our exports- helping commercial, industrial and farm exports. U.S. businesses would be more profitable under the Colombian FTA with greater exports to additional markets- this means more jobs and broader access to cheaper goods for U.S. citizens. Today, Panama is China's #1 trading partner in Central America and, while Panama and Colombia can find other reliable partners with large markets, America needs these relationships to increase its export competitiveness and to collaborate on national security interests.

It is important to note that, despite what you hear in the media, both Panama and Colombia have shown a deep dedication to improving standards of business and human rights. Colombia has regained control over much of its territory once held by insurgents, and has significantly improved public security over the last decade.

President Santos has proposed legislation to compensate victims of abuses by state agents and restore land to Colombia's displaced population, the Panama FTA includes enforceable labor and

environmental standards, and In the past 18 months, Panama has taken concrete steps to address all issues related to worker rights and bank secrecy laws. Meanwhile, we have many free trade agreements with nations throughout the region that are far from achieving the level of progress that I just described.

The harmful results of these double standards are starting to reach our shores.

We need extensive security cooperation with our allies in South America to keep drug trafficking and terrorist organizations away from our borders. Our nation, and specifically my home state of Florida, is put at risk by the free flow of narco-traffickers through Venezuela. We need every ally in Latin America that we can get to fight back against the promotion of lawlessness in nations like Venezuela. This administration has witnessed an expanded role of Iran and terrorist organizations in the region, with the continued drug flows, and a decrease in monitoring capacity as a result of foreign policy failures.

Finally, the fact that President Obama is not visiting Panama nor Colombia next week is unfortunate. It is truly a shame that the President has nothing to deliver these two allies – no Free Trade Agreements and no signs of friendship.

The inaction by President Obama is another example of a failed foreign policy. How do you lead when you don't know what you stand for? I do not see any conviction or purpose in this Administration's foreign policy. Almost daily, Gaddafi is increasing his brutal control over Libyans and Obama has shown ineffective leadership. We need leaders who will stand strong and represent American principles with conviction.

As I have said before, the Colombia FTA was signed on November 22, 2006, and then renegotiated to include more stringent environmental and labor standards. It was signed again on May 10, 2007. Panama was signed on June 28, 2007 and South Korea on June 30, 2007 with a renegotiated version signed last December.

I want to warn the Administration that they should send these agreements up in the order that they were signed to ensure the swift passage of each of the agreements.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on their experiences in past Republican and Democrat administrations and how they avoided the political pitfalls in moving forward on trade issues that are vital for U.S. national security and economic vitality.